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Malaysian Youth's Views on Elements in Taking Selfie

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Abstract

The trend of selfies has become a new culture in society. Social networking sites have offered individuals, especially youth, opportunities to present themselves. This study aims to understand what elements Malaysian youth consider when taking a selfie. A sequential mixed method research approach was used first to collect qualitative data through the focused-group discussion method and then by a survey's quantitative data. Two focus group discussions were held to gather the youth's opinions, and the qualitative data were used to build a questionnaire and distributed to 395 youth in Klang Valley of Malaysia. The results show that the youth consider three significant elements, i.e., situational, technical, and social. Among the factors, overall, the technical factor is the most critical (mean = 4.587), followed by the social factor (mean = 4.541) and lastly situational factor (mean = 4.106). However, one of the items in the social factor outstands the others (mean = 5.005). The youths deemed that taking selfies with friends and others without considering their religious and ethnic background is the most important thing. This study concluded that even though the youths pay more attention to how to take a good selfie technically but at the same time, they do consider being inclusive towards other ethnic groups in their social life.

Keywords: Selfie, Social Networking, Elements in Taking Selfie, Malaysian Youth, Sequential Mixed Method

Introduction

The development of media, technology, and the internet has brought about rapid changes to society and the lifestyle of its members. Social networking sites and new media include YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat. In addition, WhatsApp and Twitter have overgrown and become popular recently. The phenomenon is due to the more accessible access to the internet today. The phenomenon is also the case in Malaysia. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), household access to the internet increased 91.7 percent in 2020 compared to 90.1 percent in 2019. In addition, household access to mobile phones and computers increased to 98.6 percent and 77.6 percent in 2020, respectively.

Along with the rapid development of social networking sites, one phenomenon that can be detected is sharing photos on social networking sites. Social networking sites have offered

individuals, especially youth, opportunities to present themselves. As a result, activities related to selfies like taking a selfie, posing for a selfie, posting a selfie, and viewing selfies on social media have become regular activities in daily life.

The trend of selfies has become a new culture in society until the words "selfie," and "selfy" were officially accepted as new words in the Oxford Online dictionary in 2013. In the same year, it was selected by the same dictionary as the "word of the year," which is the most important word (Steinmetz, 2013). In Malaysia, the word "selfie" is also translated to the Malay word "swafoto," which refers to the act of taking a picture of oneself and uploading it to social media (Bernama, 2014). Since then, the word selfie has also been studied and defined by scholars.

Literature Review

In previous studies, the phenomenon of selfies has been discussed from various aspects. Most of them refer to selfies as self-portraits taken by oneself using a digital camera or smartphone (Qiu et al., 2015; Hess, 2015). Senft and Baym (2015), in turn, define a selfie as a gesture that can send different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences. Therefore, the selfie is considered an effective tool in presenting oneself to the public because it not only reflects the individual's personality but also helps convey the ideal concept of themselves. This is because selfies are easy to manipulate based on individual desires. Zhao et al (2016) have discussed selfies on Facebook by looking at identity issues. Their study found that Facebook users claimed their identities implicitly and not explicitly, and they were more "showing" identities than "telling" identities. In addition, Facebook users also emphasized group and consumer identities more than personal identities.

Besides that, the selfie is also associated with issues of self-presentation and self-esteem (Briggs, 2014; Miller et al., 2016; Yusof et al., 2021). Even the American Psychiatric Association (APA) also classifies selfie-taking as a mental disorder (Stuart & Nordstrom, 2014). Chua and Chang (2016) conducted a study to test the relationship of self-presentation and peer comparisons in social media in the context of beauty. Through the interview method, they proved that self-portrait modification occurred among female youth due to feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity. Their respondents believed modifying or editing a selfie was necessary to perfect a selfie. Such youth behavior is driven by their desire to gain peer attention, validation, and recognition.

The study of Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017) discussed self-presentation's psychological function in selfies. Their study explored the relationship of selfies with habitual self-presentation strategies, reflections on self-behavior and others in taking selfies, effects on selfies, and views on the effects of selfies. The study found that a habitual self-presentation strategy was relevant for understanding selfies. In addition, their respondents saw selfies as having more negative effects than positive ones, especially in shaping the world of illusions and self-esteem in a person.

Many studies link selfies with narcissism and self-esteem (Buffardi & Campbell, 2010; Barry et al., 2015; Moneva et al., 2020). The preference for uploading selfies to social media would steer one towards narcissism. For example, the study of Buffardi and Campbell (2010) showed a positive relationship between narcissism and social media users because narcissism is

deeply concerned with a person's physical appearance. Narcissism is considered a significant motivation for someone to take a profile photo in cyberspace. Users with high narcissism are more likely to upload their selfies to the virtual world than those with low narcissism. Therefore, the behavior of uploading selfies is inferred to be closely related to narcissism. The study of Moneva et al (2020) also found that uploading selfies were a potent booster for self-esteem. This is because individuals can control how they portray themselves in social network profiles, thus raising their self-esteem instantly. However, the study of Barry et al (2015) showed no significant relationship between the level of self-esteem and the number of selfies uploaded to social media.

Shin et al (2017) have studied two aspects that affect an individual when taking and sharing a selfie on social media sites: the level of social sensitivity and the level of self-confidence using social comparison theory. Their study found a positive effect on an individual's level of social sensitivity when selfies were taken and shared on social media sites. Furthermore, participants' response times were faster when the task detection probe was placed at eye level rather than the nose and mouth. Social sensitivity increases when individuals worry about other people's judgments of themselves, causing them to become more aware of social standards and norms. Sharing selfies also affects an individual's self-confidence. Participants who shared a selfie on social media sites had the opportunity to choose the aspects they wanted to emphasize for their self-presentation, indirectly positively affecting their self-confidence compared to participants who chose to keep the selfie.

Katz and Crocker (2016) studied selfies to understand the communication aspect. They emphasized the fact that people use communication technology according to their purposes. Their study deemed that most selfies were done to communicate effectively in friendships. Selfies were also seen as symbolic depictions of self to be seen and interpreted by others. Katz and Crocker also emphasized that selfies change visual communication or communication through sight.

Goodnow (2016) examined the effect of selfies on the culture of human life by looking at the rhetorical implications. Goodnow's writing discussed how selfies reflect cultural perceptions of narrative, time and value. The results of his study showed that selfies could be divided into three categories, namely, adventure, popularity, and attractiveness. The phenomenon of selfies also indicates that this type of image informs the nature of "presentist" in contemporary culture. In this situation, planning becomes less important because what matters is the present. The values of selfishness and prioritizing the present erode the values of the community and civility in society.

In studies on selfie-taking, Bruno et al (2017) conducted a study to see how youth who had never received art training organized themselves and their subjects in creating selfie images. In the tradition of artistic composition, it was found that trained ancient artists had a bias in producing portraits. They preferred to arrange their subjects' posing by showing the left cheek when producing a portrait but the right cheek when the artist produced his portrait. It is believed that the specialization of the right hemisphere caused the bias for emotional expression, which causes individuals to prefer to show the left side of the face. It is also suspected because of cultural factors such as gender status in society. Thus, Bruno et al (2017) conducted a study to determine whether ordinary youth have the same bias as the ancient

artists in taking selfies. The results showed that the youth preferred to show their left face while taking individual selfies and their right face while taking group selfies. Their behavioral bias is in line with the preferences of ancient professional artists.

As presented above, the study of selfies has covered various aspects. However, apart from Bruno et al (2017), not much research has been done to understand what elements are considered when an individual takes a selfie. So, this article aims to explore the elements considered by the youth in the process of producing selfies. With this, it is hoped that the knowledge about selfies can be enriched.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed method. At first, the qualitative data were collected through focus group discussion (FGD), and then the quantitative data were collected by conducting a questionnaire survey.

The FGD was conducted on two groups of youth. Through this method, each informant was allowed to share and compare their experiences and views on selfie-taking (Morgan, 1996). Additionally, this method helped researchers to explore things that are not readily available in interviews (Kitzinger, 1995) and gain a deeper understanding of the issue of selfie-taking.

For the FGD, some youths were recruited using purposive sampling with specific inclusion criteria. The youths with different gender (male and female) and ethnic backgrounds (Malays, Chinese, and Indians) and at least one year of experience in selfie-taking and posting photos were invited to the FGDs. Three Malay males, two Chinese females, and one Indian female youth were invited to the Klang Valley FGD. Meanwhile, one Malay female, one Malay male, one Indian female, one Indian male, one Chinese female, and one Chinese male youth were invited to Penang FGD. In Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur in Klang Valley and Georgetown in Penang are the two most popular places for selfies, according to the Times magazine (Wilson, 2014). Therefore, the youths who reside in these two cities were invited for the study. With this, two FGD sessions were conducted. The Klang Valley FGD was conducted face-to-face, while the Penang FGD was conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the same interview protocol was used for both FGDs.

The FGD sessions were recorded, and the dialogues were transcribed after that. Data transcripts were read repeatedly and then analyzed descriptively. The data were coded and categorized to form the main themes to identify the elements. The derived elements were converted into the form of items for a questionnaire. The items were measured by the Likert Scale from values 1 to 6, from very disagree to very disagree, to indicate the respondents' opinion of the items. After that, quantitative research using the survey method was conducted. Three hundred ninety-five respondents with similar background criteria for FGD were selected randomly to answer the questionnaire. The samples were selected based on the ratios of the youth population in Klang Valley. Due to movement control during the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was conducted online using Google Forms and only in the Klang Valley. Enumerators were appointed to look for suitable respondents and conduct the survey. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, mainly frequency and mean.

Findings and Discussion

From the result of the FGDs, many elements were raised by the informants in the discussion. Through the qualitative analysis, the elements were categorized into three main factors and themed by the researchers as situational, social, and technical factors. The following part presents the elements in qualitative and quantitative forms and discusses them.

Situational Factor

Informants from Klang Valley and Penang shared the same view that they would take a selfie with family and friends during the festival celebrations like the Chinese New Year festival and birthday. For instance, informant LKC4 said, "with family members on Chinese New Year and birthday. On Chinese New Year, when all relatives gather in our hometown, we take a selfie because we feel happy." Informant P4 also expressed the same idea, "celebrations such as birthday, Chinese New Year, and during vacations are the best time to take a selfie, and then I will post them."

When talking about selfies, informants from Klang Valley and Penang said that taking a selfie was to record the memory no matter when it was, where they were, and in whatever situation. Informant LKM2 said he would take a selfie with family members during a family gathering and keep the photos. Informant LKC4 agreed to LKM2's statement and said, "I would take a selfie in an outing because we have not met for a long time." LKI6 also expressed,

"I will also take a selfie here [FGD] to keep it as a memory. If I go for a trip or celebrate a festival with friends, I will take a selfie and keep it. However, I may just upload one or two photos, but I will keep the rest for memory."

Penang's Informants also said they would take selfies during the FGD session. Informants PI5, PC2, and PM1 explained that this was because FGD was an unforgettable event for them. Informant PI5 said, "when we can take a selfie with friends from different religions, we can capture that picture as our memories and moments so that we can share on social media." Informant PC2 also agreed to PI5 and said, "Especially when I am in the event and moment that should not be forgotten like events in the university, or outside with friends, I will take a selfie. After that, I will select the pretty one and post." Informant PM1 said, "Whenever it is an attractive moment, these memories should be captured in a selfie. It is very important."

In the discussion about the context for taking a selfie, most of the informants in Klang Valley showed that they would take a selfie with friends and family members at home at any time. Informant LKM3 said that many of his selfie photos were taken when he was with his family. He said, "we are close, so we are not shy about selfies." His view was supported by LKI6, who frequently takes selfies with family members. He said,

"If I am at home, I will take many selfies with my grandmother, for I am very close to her. If we see new things or cook something new, I like to take a selfie for memory, and I feel happy when I take a selfie with her. After that, I will share the selfies with my sister and father."

Besides family members, the Chinese informants LKC5 and LKC4 said they also take selfies with their friends. For example, LKC5 said, "While with my friends, eating together, doing

assignments together, or when we finished doing a presentation, we take a selfie.” Informants LKC4 also agreed with LKC5’s view and said that she usually takes a selfie with her good friends, especially with friends whom she has not met for a long time.

Meanwhile, informant LKM1 explained that he took a selfie whenever he was in a new place or whenever he found something attractive to him. LKM1 said, “we like to visit new places for vacation and take a selfie together to keep the memory. This adds fun to the event.”

What could be concluded from the narratives in the FGDs is that the situation of taking selfies by the youth could be identified mainly from two aspects, i.e., the place and the aspect of time. The examples for the aspect of place are at home, an exciting place, and a new place. Furthermore, examples of the aspect of time are during a festival, a specific occasion, and a celebration moment.

Table 1 below shows the survey results on the youths’ opinion on what item is the most significant in the situational factor.

Table 1

The Youths’ Opinion on the Situational Factor in Taking Selfie

No.	Items	Mean
1	I take selfie no matter where I am.	3.056
2	I take selfie when I am at home.	3.484
3	I take selfie when there is a festival.	4.823
4	I take selfie when there is something attracting me.	4.906
5	I take selfie when I am at a new place.	4.570
6	I take selfie when I am at a specific event.	4.228
7	I take selfie when there is a celebration for an achievement.	4.780
8	I take selfie no matter what time it is.	3.000
Average mean		4.106

Note: $N = 395$.

From the results in Table 1, in the respondent’s view, the main element that causes them to take a selfie is when something attracts them. The mean value for the item, i.e., item 4, is 4.906. The second vital situation to take a selfie is during the festival (item no. 3), with a mean of 4.823. Through the result, we also can see that the elements of taking a selfie without thinking about where they are or what time it was (items no. 1 and 8) are less agreed upon by the respondents, respectively, carrying the value of mean at 3.056 and 3.000. That means that even though taking a selfie is an everyday activity, they do not simply take a selfie at any place or time.

Compared to the results of FGDs, even though most of the informants in the FGDs emphasize that they would like to take a selfie during the festival, the survey result shows that the element is second essential. The most important element is when there is something attractive to the youth, albeit the difference in the mean is very small, i.e., 0.083.

Social Factor

In the FGDs, informants' views in the Klang Valley and Penang also expressed the importance of social factors in taking a selfie. However, overall, the social factors emphasized by the informants in the Klang Valley and Penang differed.

Informants in the Klang Valley explained that they would instead take a selfie with friends than alone. For the informant LKM1, he prefers to take pictures with many friends, which means a "wefie." He said, "When we are in a big crowd, we can see the faces of all our friends." For LKM1, this is the joy of taking a selfie with friends. Informant LKC5 shared the same view as the LKM1 and said, "I like to have a selfie with many friends."

In addition, informants in the Klang Valley also explained that they like to involve friends from different ethnic groups compared to only taking a selfie with their ethnic group. Informant LKI6 expressed that he would invite friends of different ethnicities to take selfies together. Informants LKM1 and LKM2 also have the same views as informants LKI6. Informant LKM1 said, "To me, I am the kind of person who does not care what race is. I do not care." The informant LKM2 echoed, "In my class, we always mix with Chinese and Indians. There is no class with only Malay students. Our group assignments must also be done in a mixed group. So, what is the reason not to take a selfie with other ethnic groups?"

On the same issue, Chinese informants LKC5 and LKC4 in the Klang Valley who studied in Chinese national-type schools expressed that even though they had less experience in contact with other ethnic groups in the past, they began to mix with other ethnic groups while in the national high school. LKC5 said, "My formal school was a Chinese school; less opportunity for me to mix with other ethnic groups. However, they used to look for me to take a picture together in high school because this would add more beautiful color to the pictures." LKC4 also agreed with the statement of LKC5. He said,

"My secondary school was a national school; there were many races in it. When the class party was over, we took a picture with everyone and made sure everyone joined. During my university time, whenever after an assignment presentation, we also took a picture together with other races. I don't care about race."

The informants in Penang also talked about the aspects of religious and ethnic background in their view. They expressed that they took selfies with friends regardless of religious and ethnic background. Informant PC2 said he used to take selfies with friends regardless of religion and race. Informant PI6 said, "I don't care who they are, I take it. We just want to capture the moment. So, it doesn't matter who is or is not there." Similarly, informant PC3 expressed the same view, he stated, "It doesn't bother me what race my friends are. I just take pictures with them."

Apart from that, informant PI5 mentioned he would highlight the nature of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural elements when taking a selfie if the atmosphere allowed. He said,

"I always take that into account when taking a selfie. Other than that, most of my friends are of different races. This means I always work with Chinese and Malay friends. I always mix with them, so we're close. So, we always take pictures

together. Moreover, I am always quick to get close and get to know friends of different religions so we can stay together. We make friends, and we make memories together.”

Table 2

The Youths' Opinion on the Social Factor in Taking Selfie

No.	Items	Mean
1	I make sure everyone who presents at the place or event is in the picture when taking a selfie.	3.942
2	I prefer taking selfies with friends rather than taking selfies by myself.	4.661
3	I take selfies with friends or other people regardless of religious and ethnic background.	5.005
4	I like to include different ethnicities in selfies rather than just my own ethnicity.	4.522
5	I always like to highlight the ethnic and cultural diversity when taking selfies if the situation allows.	4.575
Average mean		4.541

Note: $N = 395$.

Table 2 reveals how youths in Klang Valley consider the social factor in taking a selfie. Item no. 3 “I take selfies with friends or other people regardless of religious and ethnic background” has the highest value of mean (5.005), and item no. 2 “I prefer taking selfies with friends rather than taking selfies by myself” was selected as the second important element with mean = 4.661. These show that the youths are socially inclusive in taking a selfie. They do not have a preference for religion and ethnicity when taking selfies. This is consistent with the qualitative data presented above. The informants in FGDs also expressed a similar opinion. Besides, to the youths, selfie-taking can be considered a relatively relaxed, casual, and informal activity as they did not rate item no. 1, “I make sure everyone who presents at the place or event is in the picture when taking a selfie” that high (mean = 3.942).

Technical Factor

In the FGDs, the informants did not highlight the technical aspect of taking selfies. There were not many narratives on the factor. However, a few informants in the Klang Valley and Penang said they would pay attention to the issue of brightness and lighting while taking selfies. For informants, LK16 and PM1 will take selfies when the lighting is good. Informant LK16 said, “To be honest if we want a good selfie, we should look at the lighting. Lighting is important for taking selfies.” The same goes for PM1’s view. She said, “I would take a selfie at any time, but the lighting must be good. If there is good lighting, I will take a selfie.”

Besides brightness and lighting, informant LK16 also emphasized the camera angle in selfie-taking. He said, “sometimes people take a long time to take a selfie. They are looking for the most beautiful angle.” He explained that a selfie was taken not only once but many times so that he could choose the most beautiful selfie. He said, “When I want to take a selfie, not just one click, but many clicks, it takes a long time... even if when taking a selfie in a big group, if everyone is ok, we check the taken picture if it is not pretty, we delete it and take it again and again.” Besides, a Penang informant gave another view on the technical aspect. Informant PI6

said that he would ensure everyone is in the picture and looks at the handphone while taking the selfie. He said, "When I take a selfie with friends, I make sure all of them are on the screen and look at the handphone, then only I take the selfie."

Table 3

The Youths' Opinion on the Technical Factor in Taking Selfie

No.	Items	Mean
1	I focus on brightness and lighting when taking selfies.	4.749
2	I focus on the angle of the camera when taking selfies.	4.813
3	I make sure everyone is looking at the camera when taking selfies.	4.438
4	I take many selfies to choose the most beautiful photo.	4.646
5	I make sure everyone is well dressed and neat when taking selfies.	4.287
Average mean		4.587

Note: $N = 395$.

Table 3 shows the youths' opinions on the technical factor in taking a selfie. Although, as discussed in the FGDs, the youths in Klang Valley are concerned about the camera angle (item no. 2) and the elements of brightness and lighting (item no. 1) when taking selfies, each of them reported a mean = 4.813, and mean = 4.749. Interestingly, even though there were not many issues raised during the FGDs regarding the technical aspect of taking selfies by the informants, the survey data show that the average mean of the items related to technical factor is higher than the other two factors. For example, the average mean for technical factor is 4.587, and the average for situational and social factors is 4.106 and 4.541, respectively.

Conclusion

Based on a mixed method design, this research identified that the elements considered by the youths in taking a selfie could be categorized as situational, social, and technical factors. Among the factors, even though the youths consider more the technical factor compared to situational and social factors, we can observe that the item "I take selfies with friends or other people regardless of religious and ethnic background" in the social factor has the highest mean (5.005). That means the youths pay more attention to how to take a good selfie technically, but at the same time, they are also inclusive towards other ethnic groups in their social life.

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